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TAGS: PREL KDEM SOCI SCUL PGOV ECON PHUM KISL EG
SUBJECT: THE VIEW FROM THE AHWA: THE TALK OF TOWN IN
CAIRO'S MYRIAD CAFES

Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Economic and Political Affairs
William R. Stewart, for reason 1.4 (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Despite ubiquitous complaining about life's difficulties, and justified laments about pervasive corruption and the widely loathed Mubarak government, the denizens of Cairo's famed coffeehouses seem satisfied merely to grouse about their grievances, with no thought of taking any political action to address them. Our recent sojourns among cafes in Cairo's lower-income neighborhoods reinforced that economic struggles, corrosive corruption, and political frustration and malaise remain endemic among Egyptians, with no apparent end in sight. End summary.

¶2. (U) Although Cairo is known as "The City of a Thousand Minarets," there is one institution more omnipresent than the mosques this teeming city is famous for - the coffeehouse, or "ahwa." Conventional wisdom estimates one coffeehouse per every 200 Cairenes, which comes out to roughly 90,000 cafes in this metropolis of 18 million. For the most part, these are male-only preserves, and at any time of the day, in every neighborhood of Cairo, one can observe men of all ages and classes puffing away on water pipes, perusing newspaper headlines, gossiping about the latest political developments or neighborhood scandals, and listlessly watching TV. The blinking TV sets in ahwas are invariably turned to either a soccer game, Arab satellite news programs, a televangelist, or (more infrequently) a soap opera, with patrons often offering running commentary on all programming.

¶3. (C) As ahwas are such a Cairo fixture, and the talk in the cafes serves as a reasonable, albeit unscientific, measure of what issues are uppermost in the minds of Cairenes, we recently toured several ahwas in a range of low-income neighborhoods, in an effort to get a sense of what Egypt's urban residents are thinking. We spoke with a range of poor and lower-middle class Egyptians (exclusively male), from factory workers to college students, young military recruits brought from the countryside to Cairo to do their mandatory army service, high-school teachers, bus drivers, small shop owners, and restaurant workers. We heard a constant complaining refrain from everyone we spoke with about Egypt's rising prices, and the struggles of families to put food on the table and pay their bills. (Note: In August, year-on-year overall inflation was 23.6 percent, and at 30.9 percent for food and drink. Due to the recent decline in international commodity prices, we speculate that inflation will slow. End note). Inhaling the cheap tobacco smoke (cost per water-pipe session averages 1 Egyptian pound, or 20 U.S. cents), several fellow cafe-goers lamented that they could only afford to feed their children one meal a day.

¶4. (C) A parallel theme of discussion was the corruption endemic to Egypt. Frustrated shop owners regaled us with tales of police shakedowns and "protection" rackets, and a bus driver spoke of being often stopped by the traffic police for imagined infractions, for which he needs to pay-off the policeman, in order to avoid receiving a formal ticket with a

larger fine. One military recruit told us about having to pay-off doctors at a military hospital in order to receive emergency medical care for an injury. An angry father related the difficulty of getting his children an education in tough economic times: "The classes at their schools have hundreds of students in them, so they do not learn anything. In order for them to pass their exams, I need to hire private tutors, who incidentally, are the same teachers who will ultimately give the exams. I need to pay the teachers to "teach" my children, so that they will let them pass at the end of the year. I spend 500 LE (approximately 90 USD) every month on this. My monthly salary is 1000 LE. How am I supposed to continue doing this?"

¶5. (C) While we heard much grousing about the Egyptian government, including pointed critiques of President Mubarak and his son Gamal, there was no indication that anyone had plans to do anything but complain. We picked up no hint of revolutionary fervor; no hushed whispers expressing admiration for an opposition figure or advocating any actual political change, or calling for a resort to violence. Egyptians are frustrated and embittered, but still seem characteristically quiescent and passive, willing to sit on the sidelines in a cafe and list the failings of the government, but not to attempt to do anything about it. Many of our smoking partners said they were "hopeless" about politics in Egypt - "there will never be any change" was a constant refrain, and several people told us cynical jokes with punch lines about how Mubarak will never die. When queried about his views on the political opposition, one smoker snorted derisively and asked, "What opposition? There is no such thing here." When asked if he viewed the popular

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Muslim Brotherhood with as much disdain as political opposition parties, our conversation partner observed that the MB's charity work was commendable, "but there is no chance that they will take power, as they will never be allowed to do so by the government. So what is the point of them going to jail, ruining their lives trying to achieve an unattainable goal?"

¶6. (C) As notable as our conversation partners' disdain for the Mubarak government, was their lack of fear in expressing their opinions. There was no careful glance over the shoulder before discoursing to a foreigner about one's dislike of the regime, no murmured comments but rather, loud, sarcastic critiques of the government which often, many neighboring tables joined in on. Overall, our smoking sojourns reinforced that economic struggles, corrosive corruption, and political frustration and malaise remain endemic among Egyptians, with no apparent end in sight.

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